Saskatchewan
Education

Involving Parents and Community in Schools

Report and Future Plans

Honourable Clay Serby
Minister of Education

May 1999

An understanding of the current organizations involved in Saskatchewan's education system is critical to the understanding of this document:

Boards of Education

Saskatchewan is divided into 107 school divisions. Each school division is governed by a board of education. Boards of education are elected in a public election every three years.

District Boards of Trustees

In every school division that is divided into school districts (most rural school divisions), each school district is required to have a district board of trustees. Roles, responsibilities and operations are specified in sections 120 - 134 of *The Education Act, 1995.*

Conseils d'écoles

Each fransaskois school must have a conseil d'école. Membership, roles, responsibilities and operations of the conseils d'écoles are specified in sections 134.1 – 134.4 of *The Education Act.*

Local School Advisory Committees

In every school division that is not divided into school districts (usually urban school divisions), at the discretion of the board of education, schools may establish local school advisory committees. Roles, responsibilities and operations are specified in sections 135 - 140 of *The Education Act, 1995.*

Other Structures

Other organizations may be formed, such as parent-teacher associations, parents' associations, parent councils, home and school associations, etc. These groups are not governed by legislation and are organized locally.

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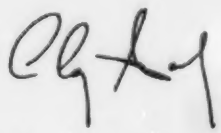
Message from the Minister

In the fall of 1997, we embarked on a public discussion process to engage parents, community members, teachers, trustees and administrators in a dialogue about school community councils as one avenue for increasing the involvement of parents and community in schools. The response to this discussion process showed, once again, the overwhelming commitment of Saskatchewan people to our schools and to K-12 education in this province.

I want to take this opportunity to publicly thank everyone who participated in the discussion process – the many principals, directors, parents and community members who led discussions in their schools, the hundreds of people who participated in discussions and submitted their responses, and the many parent councils that held special meetings and provided their considered response. I truly believe that people need to be involved in decisions that affect them. This involvement consistently results in decisions that are better informed and more workable. Thank you for your assistance and advice.

Through responses to the discussion process, we heard that there are many excellent programs and structures in place to involve parents and community members in education. There is strong local commitment to the current structures. Many of you also expressed an interest in finding new ways of working and in sharing your successes with others. Throughout the discussion process, Saskatchewan people expressed a firm commitment to parent and community involvement.

I share that commitment and ask for your help in promoting and enhancing parent and community involvement in all Saskatchewan schools. Education is a shared responsibility and through enhanced parent and community involvement and partnerships we can move ever closer toward this vision. By working together, building on the excellent programs and structures already present in so many Saskatchewan schools, and sharing our successes, we can ensure a promising future for all Saskatchewan students.



Clay Serby

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The Process

The public discussion process was multi-faceted and community-based. Efforts were made to reach as many parents as possible by asking principals and school division staff to facilitate discussions in Saskatchewan schools and communities. In total, 425 meetings were held. As well, organizations such as the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation and the Saskatchewan Association of School Councils held discussions with their members.

Please keep these proposals coming. We can profit from the exercise in thinking about what we are doing and whether we want to keep on doing it.

A Saskatoon Parent

Over 28,000 copies of *Involving Parents and Community in Schools* were distributed through requests and at meetings. Nine hundred and fifteen (915) individual response forms and 344 group responses were submitted to the department. Group responses represented groups from as few as two to as many as 70 people. As well, 118 letters and briefs were submitted. Among the responses were 67 submissions from parent associations and home and school associations. Focus groups were held in five Saskatchewan centres with randomly selected groups of people.

We would like to encourage you to continue to involve, through public meetings, Saskatchewan parents.

Drake Parent-Teacher Association

Key Themes

Importance of Parent and Community Involvement:

Many schools and school divisions are actively engaged in parent and community involvement activities. Participants stated that schools should be open and welcoming and showed strong support for parent and community involvement in schools. There was strong feeling that parent and community members have a valid contribution to make to their children's education.

The group strongly agreed in the value of parent involvement in education. Our children benefit from our involvement at school and in their education.

St. Timothy School Parent Teacher Association, Regina

Urban/Rural Differences:

Most participants noted that urban and rural needs and issues are different. Some also mentioned the north as yet a third category. Most participants felt that a "one size fits all" school community council would not be appropriate for Saskatchewan. While some participants expressed interest in change, for the most part their interest was in a flexible structure that would be shaped by local needs, issues and experience.

Each school is different, and has its own unique personality. This will mean different structures and programs for each area.

Fairview School Parent Advisory Committee, Yorkton

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Fairview School Parent Advisory Committee, Yorkton

We believe that the structure of the district board of trustees is working well in our community. Our board serves in the best interests of the students in our communities. As a rural community, this system has worked well and we believe it can continue to work well.

Outlook Elementary School Staff

The discussion process also revealed a difference in the type of involvement underway in urban and rural schools. Rural district boards of trustees are closely involved in administrative, policy and maintenance issues with many district boards having an active role in staffing and student disciplinary issues. Volunteerism, activities to support school programming, and fund-raising are most often the role of the home and school or parent association, if one is in place. Many rural respondents did not feel that fund-raising was an appropriate role for district boards.

Urban schools and school divisions vary in their approach to parent involvement structures. Some school divisions have established local school advisory committees in every school. Other school divisions have both local school advisory committees and parent associations or home and school organizations in every school. Still other school divisions have parent councils in every school and a single advisory committee for the entire school division. With regard to roles, urban respondents wished to retain fund-raising responsibilities for items to enhance the school. While some were interested in advisory roles and input into the staffing process, others felt that such roles would not be appropriate for a council in their school.

General Satisfaction with Current Structures:

Many teachers made a point of recognizing the valuable contributions to education already provided by home and school associations. In addition, those who teach in rural Saskatchewan indicated that, for the most part, local boards are already successfully performing an important role in support of education.

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Brief

Participants felt that the structures currently in place are not a barrier to parent and community involvement in schools. It was the desire of most participants to seek change and improve parent involvement through the existing structures rather than implement a new structure. Many participants suggested that they are already engaged in many of the roles outlined in *Involving Parents and Community in Schools* and that any change to the roles they are currently involved in should be based on local need.

Many groups expressed an interest in sharing their success stories and learning from others. Most participants felt that every school should have access to a some form of parent organization at the school level and that the number of councils needed in communities with more than one school should be determined locally.

Need for Enhanced Communication:

While participants did not see the need for a new structure, many sought increased communications among existing structures and with parents, community members and students. They believed that strong communication links with parents and with organizations such as the home and school, the students' representative council (SRC) and the community at large were important.

There should be a direct and interactive relationship between the board and the Council.

Queen Elizabeth School, Lloydminster

Rural participants expressed the importance of processes whereby the district board can communicate with and receive input from the community and parents. As well, both urban and rural participants expressed the importance of strong communication links between the board of education and school-level organizations, such as district boards, local school advisory committees and parent councils.

An increased collaboration should be encouraged among the school board, Home and School Association, SRC, etc., when needed.

A Rural Participant

Concern about the Role of the Principal:

The majority of participants felt that the role of the principal, whether in a large or small school, urban or rural, is extremely challenging, with many principals carrying a heavy workload. Some expressed concern that the principal's involvement as outlined in *Involving Parents and Community in Schools* might overtax an already challenging position. There was, however, recognition of the importance of the principal's role in parent and community involvement.

It is important to recognize that school principals have a major role in developing a climate that fosters parental involvement. It is not the change in structure that facilitates parental involvement, but rather an inherent belief that it makes a difference in the learning climate of the school.

Saskatoon West Board of Education

Interest in Expanded Membership:

While participants are satisfied with their current structures, much interest was shown in opening up participation on those structures by including community members and students either as members or invited guests. Many groups expressed an interest in finding ways to attract parents who may be hard to reach or not usually involved. Some were concerned about being able to attract a sufficient number of participants. Others felt limited by the number of people on the council, preferring a model where everyone who wishes to be a member is a member and the executive is elected.

I would like to see more involvement on a parental or community level. This could only help our school system, our community and our parent/child relationship.

A Moosomin Participant

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I would like to see more involvement on a parental or community level. This could only help our school system, our community and our parent/child relationship.

A Moosomin Participant

There was some concern about the potential for conflict of interest when involving teachers and students. This was mainly among district boards that have a role in staffing and student discipline. Groups that were involved in program planning, fund-raising and volunteer efforts were more likely to embrace the idea of involving teachers and students.

A large number of participants expressed concern about the possibility of domination by special interest groups if members are elected at a public meeting.

Many participants expressed interest in reserving some seats on the local board for elected parents of school children.

What are the most appropriate forms of involvement? We have concluded that the answer involves developing broader, more innovative approaches than the proposed council structure. It may mean a closer look at possible ways for building a culture of involvement. What is most needed now is the leadership to begin bringing this about.

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Brief

How Should Parents and Community be Involved in Schools?

Respondents identified a wide range of ways for parents and community to become involved in schools. Most participants felt that involvement at home where parents take a keen interest in their children and in their children's education is key.

The next most popular way identified for parents and community members to become involved in education is involvement at the school as volunteers assisting in a variety of ways, including classroom help, sharing skills and talents, sharing stories, helping in the library, coaching, fund-raising, chaperoning, etc. Participants expressed interest in opportunities to learn about and have input into curriculum and school programs, plans and goals.

Communications between home and school were identified as an important part of an open and welcoming school. Newsletters, information nights, open houses and parent-teacher interviews were identified as important communications tools.

Processes for Selecting Members:

As elected local people we feel that our voice is not only heard but also acted upon.

A District Board Trustee

The model presented in *Involving Parents and Community in Schools* suggested that processes for selecting members be determined locally to meet local needs and interests. Judging by the responses, flexibility and local determination are preferred by participants. Rural residents strongly support election of district board trustees in public elections as is currently done. Many rural

participants, however, noted the importance of having at least some positions on the board filled by elected parents.

The range of methods for selecting members suggested by urban participants reflects current practice. Some groups use a town hall model where everyone is on the council and the executive is elected. Other groups seek volunteers, elect members at a general meeting or hold elections among peer groups. This suggests the importance of flexibility in the manner of selecting council members.

Restrictions on who can be involved would reduce the number of parents able to be involved. All parents of students must be able to be a member.

Deshaye Catholic School Parent and Community Meeting, Regina

Implementation Process:

While many participants saw a need for increased involvement of parents in schools, they did not see that legislated change would enable such a change to occur. Some participants suggested that what is needed is a change in attitude among parents, school staff and society as a whole. Many participants expressed an interest in guidelines, such as a sample code of ethics, principles and effective strategies for enhancing involvement. Other participants noted that broader change, such as legislation that would require employers to grant employees a certain number of days each year for involvement in their children's education, would be an effective step.

A framework is required, but not a mandated role. Parents need flexibility in the system.

Perry Parents Association, Regina

Roles of School-Level Organizations:

Overall reaction to the roles outlined in *Involving Parents and Community in Schools* was mixed. There is a range of responsibility carried by district boards of trustees. Some are strictly involved in responsibilities outlined in *The Education Act,* while others do much more. Some urban and rural participants stated that the roles were similar to those already being performed by their organization; others, especially urban participants, felt that the roles were too ambitious and would scare people away. Still others felt that the roles did not go as far as the roles their own organization was currently fulfilling.

The structures presently in place are not a barrier to involving parents in schools. If there are barriers, they are people and attitudinal barriers. Let's work to foster positive attitudes toward involvement, by all parties, and to have all partners accept and even embrace their responsibility.

A Director of Education

While some felt that parents and community members should have input into hiring practices and are currently involved in that area, others were not interested in such involvement.

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Types of Training and Inservice:

Participants suggested that all types of parent and community involvement should be recognized. A new school level governance structure was not seen to be necessary for increasing parent and community involvement. Preference was stated for supporting training and leadership within the current structure.

Saskatchewan School Trustees Research Centre Report #97-11

Most participants felt that, at a minimum, members would need an effective orientation to their roles and responsibilities as council members. As well, there was an interest in orientation to *The Education Act*, board policies, curriculum, school programs and policies. Most participants expressed that the training and inservice needed would best be determined locally, based on the skills, abilities and interests of the people involved. Other areas of interest included effective meetings, keeping minutes, bookkeeping, long- and short-range planning, problem solving, conflict resolution, enlarging the volunteer base, current trends in education, policy development and equity issues.

Length of Service:

A definite split in opinion was evident among urban and rural participants concerning how long members should be on the council, with urban respondents feeling that two years is too long and rural respondents feeling that it is not long enough. This reflects current practice in each jurisdiction.

Future Plans

A structure that supports parent and community involvement must encourage a continuum of levels at which parents can be involved as their children move through the school system. All involvement must be legitimate, valued and encouraged.

Saskatchewan Association of School Councils Brief

Saskatchewan people are committed to their current structures for parent and community involvement in education. The Government of Saskatchewan recognizes that commitment and will not make any changes to legislation respecting local school advisory committees and District Boards of Trustees as a result of this public discussion process.

Instead, efforts will be focused on an initiative that ensures continued and sustained support for parent and community involvement in education. This approach will build upon the good work being done in so many schools across the province. While school-based councils are one way to encourage parent and community involvement and partnerships in education, the most successful initiatives are broad-based and encompass a variety of activities, including:

- meeting children's basic needs;
- developing openness and effective two-way communication;
- supporting learning at home and in the community;
- participating in advisory and volunteer roles;
- building collaboration and partnerships; and,
- participating in governance.

Parent and community involvement and partnerships in education are not the individual responsibility of any one group. Parents, community members, teachers, administrators and trustees must all participate in creating a community within and around the school. Saskatchewan Education will work with its partners to create an environment where parent and community involvement is nurtured and supported.

A provincial working committee of educational partners will be formed to create a shared strategy to encourage and support parent and community involvement in all sectors of the education community. The shared strategy will be guided by a provincial policy framework, including a vision, goals and principles for parent and community involvement in education.

Saskatchewan has a well deserved reputation for demonstrating leadership in many areas of education. Examples are found in the province's highly innovative approaches to curriculum and instruction, its promotion of inclusive models of education (including Community Schools), and in the generally collaborative approach taken by the major partners in education. We believe that another important opportunity for this kind of leadership lies in the development of strategies which will strengthen appropriate forms of involvement by parents and the community in schools, and by schools in the community.

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